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Suzanne M. Hudson

Southern Cross University, sue.hudson@scu.edu.au

Peter Hudson

Queensland University of Technology, dr.p.hudson@gmail.com

Noelene L. Weatherby-Fell

University of Wollongong, noelene@uow.edu.au

Brad Shipway

Southern Cross University, brad.shipway@scu.edu.au

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Graduate Standards for Teachers: Final-year Preservice Teachers Potentially Identify the Gaps

Suzanne Hudson
Southern Cross University
Peter Hudson
Queensland University of Technology
Noelene Weatherby-Fell
University of Wollongong
Brad Shipway
Southern Cross University

Abstract: The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST) were devised to identify the attributes, skills and practices required of teachers at various career stages. This study investigates final-year preservice teachers' self-reported confidence against the APST at the graduate career stage. This mixed-method study used a Likert scale survey and interviews. Preservice teachers indicated areas of confidence, and also identified potential gaps in their teacher preparation with 30% or more of preservice teachers indicating they lacked confidence to: Use strategies to support full participation of students with a disability; demonstrate understanding for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; engage with parents and carers to support student learning; and report on student learning to parents and carers. Qualitative data (n=10) explained reasons for these potential gaps, such as a "lack of experience in these areas of teaching" and a need for "universities to ensure experiences in these areas during practicum".

Introduction

In 2010 the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) assumed responsibility for the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers, which were endorsed by the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA) in the December of that year (AITSL, 2011). The standards were developed to highlight the attributes and practices for teachers at the various career stages of teaching (e.g. Graduate, Proficient, Highly Accomplished and Lead). For preservice teachers, their goal is to work towards meeting the graduate career stage to successfully make the transition to the profession. However, there is little or no evidence investigating final-year preservice teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to implement these standards before entering the profession. The study aims to determine final-year preservice teachers' perceived readiness for the profession against the prescribed APST at the graduate career stage. The study also attempts to identify potential gaps in their teacher education by considering preservice teachers' perspectives about their confidence for implementing the standards. Understanding the gaps in teacher education from an end-user perspective may assist to advance educational programs presented by tertiary providers.

Literature and Background

Universities are continually under pressure to enhance their teacher preparation programs for producing work-ready graduates (Barrie, 2006; Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group [TEMAG], 2014). This is underpinned by the notion that the “greatest source of variance” that can impact on student outcomes is the teacher (Hattie, 2003, p.3). Hattie continues that “excellence in teaching can have the most powerful impact on achievement” (p. 4). Reviews into teaching and teacher education (e.g., House of Representatives Standing Committee on Educational and Vocational Training, 2007 [HRSCEVT]; Masters, 2009; TEMAG, 2014; Victorian Parliament, Education and Training Committee, 2005) have been further catalysts for the development of an Australian curriculum and standards for teachers. It is envisaged that embedding professional standards with a national curriculum may be a way to develop greater consistency in the delivery of a world-class education system.

The need to undertake regular reviews into teacher education, the revisiting of teacher professional standards, the implementation of proficiency tests, selection of preservice teachers into teacher education programs and, recommendations and funding provided by governments at both state and Federal levels are measures undertaken in a move towards improving teacher quality, particularly as an “investment in Education is in the national interest” (Australian Council of Deans of Education, [ACDE], 2004, p. 1). The regularity of reviews and reports is linked to the ever-changing nature of teaching and teacher responsibility. Due to societal changes “the role of the teacher is probably more complex than it has ever been” (Victorian Parliament, Education and Training Committee, 2005, p. xvi), with the engagement of diverse learners viewed as one of the greatest challenges (DEEWR, 2010). It is hoped that with on-going reviews, research and reform initiatives, more information will become available to inform teacher practices towards improving student outcomes.

At a national level, the need to produce quality teachers was raised in the *National Partnership to Improve Teacher Quality* (2008) and the Melbourne Declaration (2008). These reports highlighted that improving teacher quality was a much needed reform if the outcomes for students were to improve. *Smarter Schools National Partnership* (Department of Education and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2010) demonstrated the Australian government’s willingness to provide funding for advancing the teaching profession. In this reform initiative, the Federal Government funded programs to “attract, train, place, develop and retain quality teachers and leaders” in Australian schools (DEEWR, 2010, p.1). DEEWR proposed the need to have further pathways into teaching, a consistent approach to teacher education by universities, more emphasis on graduates who understand the needs of Indigenous people, national consistency in teacher registration, improved performance management, rewards for quality teaching, and an improvement in access to workforce data. Other initiatives include raising literacy and numeracy standards in “targeted remote communities in the Northern Territory” (p. 1) and elsewhere. Through the implementation of these reforms it is purported that Australian students, no matter what their schooling context, will receive a “world class education” (p. 1).

In 2010, Caldwell and Sutton provided further attributes and practices that were required by beginning teachers. Their review titled *Review of Teacher Education and Induction*, focused on the Queensland context and positioned teacher education programs within national and international directions. Caldwell and Sutton (2010) made twenty-one recommendations that confirm the need for suitable teacher standards and the importance of graduates who understand assessment, teach literacy and numeracy effectively, and possess positive student behaviour management strategies. In response, the report titled *Government*

Response to the Review of Teacher Education (Department of Education and Training, 2011) recognised the recommendations of Caldwell and Sutton. The authors of this government report note that, while Queensland teacher education programs prepare their graduates with the theoretical knowledge, “beginning teachers also need practical skills to apply that knowledge to a wide range of student needs and classroom situations” (p. 1). Suggestions emerging from this report contend that teacher registration bodies and universities support the suggested recommendations “which include a renewed focus on behaviour management and parental engagement, and support for aspiring teachers to acquire practical skills” (p.1).

Implementation of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers are further measures aimed at raising teacher quality by defining the attributes and practices of effective teaching (AITSL, 2011). It is purported that with the standards a clear vision of what quality teaching looks like is now consistently defined across the country. Government reviews and reports have influenced the development of the standards by providing suggestions on the attributes and practices graduate teachers should possess to become effective teachers (e.g., see HRSCEVT, 2007; Masters, 2009). The development of teaching standards is not only reported in Australia but for over a decade “Worldwide there has been a range of initiatives in the area of standards for teachers as part of a discourse of professionalism” (O’Meara & MacDonald, 2004, p.111). In Australia, the need for teaching standards was first highlighted in 2003 when MCEETYA produced the National Profiles for Teachers. Statements supporting the National Profiles claimed they would promote schools as learning communities, raise the standard and status of the teaching profession, ensure the quality of teacher education programs, and enhance the quality of teacher renewal (MCEETYA, 2003).

Prior to the release of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (AITSL, 2011) across Australia, some concerns have been raised about the notion of standards and the lack of empirical evidence that their implementation will raise the quality of teachers and education (Hudson, 2009; Tuinamuna, 2011). It is further argued that standards may be a checklist of teacher attributes and practices that change the focus of teacher education to teacher training with preservice teachers merely ticking the boxes as they proceed through their teacher education course (Zionts, Shellady, & Zionts, 2006). This is supported by Connell (2009) who claims that such a competency-driven model does not support “Education as an intellectual discipline” (p. 7). In addition, there are concerns about the validity and construction processes for creating standards (Zionts et al., 2006). Nevertheless, it is advocated by supporters of the professional standards that they provide graduates and teachers with clear guidelines of generally accepted competencies for the profession (HRSCEVT, 2007) at the various career stages. Hattie (2013) notes that the success, or not, of the standards in influencing teacher quality will depend on their implementation. In their report for AITSL, Marshall, Cole, and Zbar’s (2012) outlined that determining success of the APST may be measured within system and sector policies, industrial agreements, and registration processes. A further report by AITSL (2015) entitled *Insights: Evaluation of the Implementation of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* concludes that generally the APST were supported by members of the profession however, it was determined that support mechanisms for implementation are essential for the standards to be effective.

In 2014, the Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG) released a report *Action now: Classroom ready teachers* that again emphasises the need for quality teacher graduates and reforms to initial teacher education. This report highlights six key directions: National program accreditation for initial teacher education against the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers; Rigorous program accreditation against program standards (AITSL, 2016) with evidence of a sound theoretical underpinning and evidence of effectiveness; Transparent entry into teacher education courses; An integrated system where

higher education providers, schools and schooling systems are working together to produce quality teacher graduates and positive student outcomes; Evidence graduates are ready for teaching and; Teacher pre-registration so beginning teachers can be part of the profession from day one (TEMAG, 2014, p. vii).

Australian universities are responding to the many reforms. Despite the debate and concerns about the standards highlighted above, teacher preparation programs are now aligned to the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (AITSL, 2011) and, in most states and territories, final-year preservice teachers are assessed against the graduate standards in their final practicum reports (e.g. NSW Professional Experience Framework). By aligning the graduate standards to the professional experience reports it has allowed for the preservice teachers to not only demonstrate knowledge of the standards but an opportunity to apply and demonstrate the standards to their teaching. Additionally, reforms related to initial teacher accreditation (ATSL, 2016), propose a “capstone” assessment task that will demonstrate final-year preservice teachers learning, knowledge, impact on student outcomes and, the successful attainment of the graduate standards. Government bodies hope that these mechanisms will raise the quality of teacher graduates with AITSL (2016) advocating the need to strengthen initial teacher education.

To have work-ready graduates, insights from studies around beginning teachers may show interesting connections to this current study. For instance, in a US study of 40 graduates from a Master of Teaching program, Fantilli and McDougall (2009) show that the beginning teachers involved in the study required further practical activities such as planning for students with exceptional needs and communicating with parents. Similarly, Yost (2006) had identified that beginning teachers require more experience around teaching and classroom management strategies to support students with diverse needs. Research must also investigate preservice teachers’ developmental levels to gain an understanding of what they require towards becoming work ready.

The aim of this study was to investigate final-year preservice teachers’ perceptions of their Bachelor of Education (primary) teacher preparation. In particular, the preservice teachers, from three universities in two different states of Australia, self-reported their confidence for teaching against the Australian Professional Standards for Teaching (APST) at the graduate career stage.

Research Design

Theoretical Position of the Study

This interpretive study uses a post-positivist perspective and a theoretical framework that draws upon the work of Bandura (1977) who notes that self-efficacy impacts on the ability and confidence to undertake a task (see also Pajares, 2003). Bandura (1977) identifies that self-efficacy can be influenced by: *Mastery experiences* where a task is repeated hence, skills are gained from practice; *Vicarious experience*, which is the successful modelling of a task which gives confidence to the observer that they can also achieve; *Social Persuasions*, which is the encouragement or discouragement received by others while undertaking the task; *Physiological factors*, which is the way a person may respond to stress which impacts on their ability to complete a task. Although positive self-efficacy or, high levels of self-confidence (Pajares, 1992) does not always equate to ability, Bandura (1994, 1977) advocates that people with strong levels of confidence will experience accomplishment, personal well-being and higher achievement in the attainment of specific goals. Furthermore, self-efficacy can influence the way in which a task is initiated and the determination applied in overcoming difficulties that may arise (Bandura, 1977). There is also some evidence to

suggest that, in some key learning areas, a teacher's perception of confidence to teach can be directly related to their teaching ability in the classroom (Hudson, 2011; Jamieson-Proctor, Burnett, Finger, & Watson, 2006; Jamieson-Proctor & Finger, 2006; Russell-Bowie, 2011), and can be linked to student success and achievement (Dellinger, Bobbett, Olivier, & Ellett, 2008; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2007).

Method

This study included 312 final-year preservice teachers from three universities across two states of Australia. The names of all participants, their university, and their locations were de-identified to maintain anonymity. Such ethical considerations are important to protect the participants and allow for authentic responses (Creswell, 2009). The final-year preservice teachers in this study were asked to reflect on their learning and report on their confidence against the APST at the Graduate career stage. This study employed an explanatory mixed-method approach through a two-part research design (Ivankova, Creswell, & Stick, 2006). All participating final-year preservice teachers self-reported their confidence on a five-part Likert survey (Part 1). The results from the survey were used to inform the development of questions for one-to-one interviews with 10 participants (Part 2). The interviews provided further explanation about the underlying reasons for such responses indicated in Part 1.

The survey was administered at the end of the first semester of the preservice teachers' final year of their teacher education degree. Incomplete survey responses were discarded (Hittleman & Simon, 2006), leaving 312 completed responses for analysis. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS (a statistical analytical software package) by collating agree and strongly agree items to provide an indication of the level of agreement associated with their confidence to engage with each focus area within the APST at the Graduate career stage. Statistical measures included percentages, mean scores and standard deviations and were presented in tables associated with the seven APSTs and 37 Focus Areas. This then allowed for analysis and discussion.

Qualitative data involved interviewing 10 final-year preservice teachers (three each from two universities and four from another university) four weeks after completing the survey. Table 1 summarises the age and gender of the preservice teachers. There were 10 final-year preservice teachers interviewed, eight females and two males. Seven participants were in the 20-30 year age group while two were in the 30-40 age groups and one in the 40-45 age group.

Interviews were selected via volunteer sampling (Creswell, 2009) and, similar to the survey, interview data remained confidential with pseudonyms noted at the time when the interview data was transcribed. Questions were derived from the analysis of the statistical data that required further exploration. For example, and with reference to a specific survey item, participants were asked, "In the survey data many preservice teachers indicated they were not confident for demonstrating an understanding for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, why do you think this was the case?" Similarly, "the survey showed that many preservice teachers were not confident engaging with parents and carers to support student learning, why might this be the case?" These digitally-recorded semi-structured interviews were between 30 and 45 minutes duration. The interviews were transcribed by an experienced research assistant and then hand-coded to ensure the researchers were close to the data (Creswell, 2014). The questions and subsequent coding of the data into themes related to the statistical findings with the purpose of exploring why the preservice teachers

had responded to the survey as they did. In this way, the qualitative data was used to explain the quantitative data hence, the data were complementary.

Summary of the preservice teachers who participated in the interviews					
Participant	Gender	Age range	Participant	Gender	Age range
1	Female	20-25	6	Male	20-25
2	Female	40-45	7	Female	30-35
3	Female	20-25	8	Female	20-25
4	Female	35-40	9	Female	25-30
5	Female	25-30	10	Male	20-25

Table 1: Age and Gender of Interviewed final-year preservice teachers (PST)

Results and Discussion

Standard 1 focused on preservice teachers' (PST) perceptions of knowing students and how they learn. Although the significant majority of preservice teachers believed they had an understanding of how students learn and the intellectual development of students, more than 10% were either unsure or disagreed they had confidence in focus areas 1.3-1.6 (Table 2). Indeed, there were only 62% who agreed they could use strategies to support students with a disability and 60% who felt they could engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Despite claiming confidence for differentiated teaching (focus area 1.5), confidence in their abilities to engage with a diverse student population tended to be an issue for many final-year preservice teachers (e.g., focus areas 1.3, 1.4, 1.6).

APST focus area at Graduate career stage	%*	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1.1 Understand the intellectual development of students	90	4.00	0.44
1.2 Understand how students learn	98	4.19	0.46
1.3 Successfully teach students with diverse cultural backgrounds	71	3.78	0.63
1.4 Implement lessons to engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students	60	3.61	0.73
1.5 Differentiate teaching to meet students' learning needs	89	4.09	0.60
1.6 Use strategies to support full participation of students with a disability	62	3.67	0.74

*%=Percentage of students who either "agreed" or "strongly agreed" about their confidence with the APST focus area.

Table 2: Standard 1 – Year Preservice Teachers' Perceptions of Knowing Students and How They Learn (n=312)

As previously highlighted, the interview data explored reasons behind statistical data, particularly with focus areas 1.3, 1.4, 1.6. It seems some final-year preservice teachers reported they disagreed they were confident in these three areas due to a lack of experience. A typical response noted: "Even though I have experienced three different practicums, I can honestly say I have no experience in teaching students with a disability, students from diverse cultural backgrounds or Indigenous students" (PST 5). It was apparent from the interviews that the final-year preservice teachers had completed units at university but it seemed their lack of experience in the classroom impacted their level of confidence.

We talked about diversity for four years in various units we studied at university however, not having the experience is why so many of us would say we don't have the same level of confidence as we do with other areas of our teaching (PST 1).

There were also suggestions that the final-year preservice teachers were worried they would "say or do the wrong thing when working with Indigenous students or students from culturally different backgrounds" (PST 10). While some final-years admitted "I think I need to go and investigate more information about different cultures as I need to know more if I

am to be a successful teacher” (PST 3). From the interviews it could be ascertained that the preservice teachers recognised their lack of experiences in these areas however, as can be seen from the last response, the preservice teachers were willing to undertake further professional learning.

Australia has considerable student diversity in its population. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, www.abs.gov.au) showing that one in four Australians were born overseas and that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander may exceed 900,000 by 2026. ABS also report that in 2013 there were 3,958,300 or 20.0% of the population who reported a disability. These figures give a clear indication that teachers entering the workforce must have clear understandings around knowing students’ diverse backgrounds and how they can be supported in teaching.

Preservice teacher education may not provide sufficient experiences for engaging with school students from diverse backgrounds or those with disabilities. In-school professional experience placements within the vicinity of various universities may not have classes where there are students from diverse backgrounds or classes with disability students. Despite preservice teachers who have had experiences in classes supporting students with disabilities, the range of disabilities is considerable (e.g., mobility, head, spinal, visual, hearing, cognitive, psychological) and having first-hand experiences across the range of disabilities before entering a school would not be possible in a preservice teacher education program. More than likely, when the preservice teacher graduates to enter a school as a beginning teacher on a class with a disability student, the disability will be unique just as the student is unique.

Beginning teachers working with students who have a disability, will require support to understand and respond appropriately to the uniqueness of the disability. Nevertheless, tertiary education programs need to consider how best to provide information to preservice teachers so they can feel empowered to enact effective practices when they enter the school system. Some preservice teachers noted in the interviews that they were “nervous about working with students with a disability as there are such a range of disabilities” (PST 8). They indicated they hoped that there would be “assistance and guidance when they started teaching so that they could fully understand how best to support students with a disability” (PST 2). Others admitted they would need to undertake “further reading and professional learning to support disability students” (PST 4 & 6) indicating they were prepared to find out more to ensure student support in their classroom.

Ninety percent or more of the preservice teachers ($n=312$) self-reported confidence with most of the focus areas in Standard 2, which involved content knowledge and how to teach it. The highest percent was using curriculum knowledge to design lesson plans (95%, Table 3). However, two focus areas (2.4 & 2.7) involving interactions with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students had more than 10% of preservice teachers who could not agree they were confident in these areas.

APST focus area at Graduate career stage	%*	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
2.1 Demonstrate content knowledge for teaching	93	4.17	0.55
2.2 Sequentially organise content knowledge for teaching	91	4.20	0.59
2.3 Use curriculum knowledge to design lesson plans	95	4.32	0.60
2.4 Demonstrate understanding for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students	70	3.75	0.69
2.5 Apply strategies for teaching numeracy	93	4.17	0.55
2.6 Incorporate ICT skills across the curriculum	90	4.23	0.67
2.7 Demonstrate respect for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students	86	4.06	0.66
2.8 Apply strategies for teaching literacy	91	4.12	0.56

*%=Percentage of students who either “agreed” or “strongly agreed” about their confidence with the APST focus area.

Table 3. Standard 2 - Preservice Teachers’ Perceptions of Knowing the Content and How to Teach It

Interviews investigated the reasons behind the lack of confidence for focus areas 2.4 and 2.7. The final-year preservice teachers noted that they were asked to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Culture as part of the planning to highlight cross curricula priorities noted in the Australian Curriculum. Six of the ten participants interviewed noted they did not always understand how they would truly incorporate this into their planning. Additionally, although the interviewees felt they had an understanding for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, their lack of experience impacted their ability to confirm they were confident in their practice. Typical responses came from PST 7 and 9 respectively.

I actually feel quite confident for teaching in most areas. We have certainly covered a lot of information at university about teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, so I guess you could say I have an understanding but I am definitely not confident because my experience is limited.

I feel I have studied the teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at university. But the lack of teaching Aboriginal students has made me concerned that I am not ready for teaching. I am hoping with experience I will gain effective teaching practices.

Considerable numbers of preservice teachers in this study indicated a lack of confidence for understanding about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Analysing the coursework for the universities involved in this study, there appears ample opportunities through coursework materials for understanding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The main issue as suggested in the interviews is that many preservice teachers have not had first-hand experiences with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students during professional school experiences. Indeed, Bandura (1977, 1994) purports the importance of Mastery Experiences in the development of self-efficacy or levels of confidence. Conversely, without the experiences, it seems these preservice teachers could not report or agree they were confident for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students although they did report in the interviews they had an understanding. Indeed, many schools associated with the university may not have classes with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, which limits first-hand opportunities for preservice teacher engagement. Furthermore, mentor teachers may not have identified those students who had culturally diverse backgrounds in their classrooms. Preservice teachers may have taught Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander students without even realising.

The final-year preservice teachers ($n=312$) reported on their confidence on each of the focus areas aligned with Standard 3. Again, 90% or more claimed they were confident in most of the Standard 3 focus areas (i.e., 3.1-3.4; Table 4). Evaluation strategies to improve student learning (3.5) and engaging with parents and carers to support student learning (3.6)

were below 90%. Indeed, nearly a third of the participants were unsure or disagreed they could engage with parents and carers to support student learning.

APST focus area at Graduate career stage	%*	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
3.1 Set achievable learning goals for all students of all abilities	91	4.31	0.55
3.2 Sequence suitable learning experiences	95	4.21	0.52
3.3 Use a wide range of teaching strategies	96	4.25	0.54
3.4 Demonstrate a range of communication skills in the classroom	95	4.23	0.57
3.5 Demonstrate a range of evaluation strategies to improve student learning	86	3.95	0.54
3.6 Engage with parents and carers to support student learning	69	3.71	0.73

*%=Percentage of students who either “agreed” or “strongly agreed” about their confidence with the APST focus area.

Table 4. Standard 3 - Preservice Teachers' Perceptions of Planning for and Implementing Effective Teaching and Learning

Interviews assisted in explaining why there may be discrepancies in their confidence with certain focus areas, such as focus areas 3.5 and 3.6. An emerging theme from the preservice teacher responses indicated that the short four to six weeks available for professional experience did not allow time for the implementation of ongoing evaluation strategies for improving student learning. Although preservice teachers noted they understood the various assessment strategies and incorporated this into their teaching, there was little time to demonstrate ongoing evaluation strategies. All preservice teachers involved in this study called for a rethinking of professional experience that allowed for enough time to further develop important teaching practices including on-going evaluation to support student learning.

Over half of the preservice teachers noted that during professional experience their mentor teachers were not supportive of them interacting with parents and carers. The preservice teachers commented that mentor teachers provided reasons about their reluctance such as “providing incorrect feedback about student learning to parents and carers” (PST 1) and an importance for the preservice teacher to be “focussing on teaching rather than dealing with parents” (PST 4). One preservice teacher (PST 10) noted that their mentor teacher stated that “there will be plenty of time for you to get to work with parents once you are teaching”. Teaching is more than just what happens in the classroom. Working with parents and carers to support student learning is pivotal if students are to have positive outcomes for learning. Mentor teachers hosting preservice teachers during professional experience should be educated about supporting their mentees to understand the broader role of teachers within school communities. Therefore, the final professional experience needs to incorporate opportunities for preservice teachers to develop a deeper understanding about the wider role of the teacher that includes, working with parents and carers to support student learning.

Although there was considerable confidence for planning and implementing effective teaching and learning, preservice teachers require further understandings around evaluative strategies for improving learning. It is possible that those not indicating confidence in this area have been shown evaluative strategies at the university level, however, a toolkit of strategies needs to be more visible. There is caution from mentor teachers in allowing preservice teachers to engage with parents and carers to support student learning, particularly as there can be delicate situations requiring a professional with considerable experience to address issues. Nevertheless, preservice teachers in their final year are months away from having their own classrooms and interacting with parents and carers. Without adequate experiences in a lead up to employment, beginning teachers can struggle with knowing how to engage with parents and carers. Providing opportunities for mentoring preservice teachers' engagement with parents may assist in building confidence. Such opportunities might include sitting in on parent-teacher interviews or guided involvement in a parent-teacher

conversation. Universities may also need to embed role playing situations on learning how to address parents with issues about the school, teacher, other students and educational outcomes.

Standard 4 had high percentages across its focus areas, with 89% or more reporting they were confident with each focus area (Table 5). Supporting inclusive student engagement in the classroom (4.1), having clear expectations for teaching (4.2), using practical strategies to manage student behaviour (4.3) and monitoring student safety (4.4) were indicated as strengths with 90% or more claiming they were confident in these areas.

APST focus area at Graduate career stage	%*	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
4.1 Support inclusive student engagement in the classroom	94	4.14	0.53
4.2 Organise the classroom with clear expectations for teaching	95	4.25	0.57
4.3 Use practical strategies to manage student behaviour	90	4.13	0.64
4.4 Monitor student safety and well-being in the school and classroom	94	4.21	0.58
4.5 Maintain ethical use of all ICTs in teaching	89	4.16	0.64

*%=Percentage of students who either “agreed” or “strongly agreed” about their confidence with the APST focus area.

Table 5. Standard 4 - Preservice Teachers’ Perceptions of Creating and Maintaining Supportive and Safe Learning

Interview data explained reasons behind those who may be unsure or disagree with their confidence for maintaining ethical use of all ICTs in teaching (focus area 4.5). Interviewees who disagreed they were confident in ICTs stated there was “such a range of ICTs available they could not agree they were confident in this area” (PST 6). Other preservice teachers noted they required “more information about the ethical use of ICTs” and suggested “a greater emphasis on this in the university coursework (PST 9). The preservice teachers in the interviews raised “concerns about understanding the ethical uses of ICTs and felt further reading and professional learning was required” (PST 3).

Preservice teachers reported considerable confidence for creating and maintaining a supportive and safe learning environment. All ten interviewees described how they had worked with their mentor teachers during professional experience to create an environment that was conducive for student learning. It appeared that during these experiences they had success in the above areas that positively impacted their perceived confidence. Beginning teachers often report considerable issues with managing behaviour in the classroom (Pillen, Beijaard, & Brok, 2013). It is interesting to note that the final-year preservice teachers involved in this study were confident however, they all noted the role of their mentor teacher in assisting them to work towards a positive classroom environment. This highlights the importance of the guidance provided by the mentor teacher for early career teachers in the area of classroom and behaviour management. Those mentoring beginning teachers need to consider how they can guide and support their mentees to ensure they continue to experience success in the above areas as they make the transition to the profession.

Standard 5 was the only standard where percentages of agreed and strongly agreed responses were less than 90% across the board (Table 6). Assessment, feedback and reporting on student learning is essential for effective teaching to occur; however making consistent judgements through moderation about student learning (5.3) and using assessment knowledge to design lesson plans (5.5) had more than 10% unsure or disagreeing they had confidence in these areas. Furthermore, their confidence for reporting on student learning to parents and careers was considerably low (64%, Table 6).

APST focus area at Graduate career stage	%*	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
5.1 Use formative strategies to assess student learning	89	4.06	0.56
5.2 Provide meaningful feedback to students to support their learning	89	4.09	0.59
5.3 Make consistent judgements through moderation about student learning	82	3.92	0.57
5.4 Report on student learning to parents and carers	64	3.64	0.78
5.5 Use assessment knowledge to design lesson plans	87	4.11	0.64
5.6 Use summative strategies to assess student learning	89	4.07	0.57

*%=Percentage of students who either “agreed” or “strongly agreed” about their confidence with the APST focus area.

Table 6. Standard 5 - Preservice Teachers’ Perceptions of Assessing, Providing Feedback and Reporting on Student Learning

In an explanatory approach, data from interviews provided reasons behind the quantitative statistics. All preservice teachers involved in the interviews reported that they had no experience in reporting to parents. Two preservice teachers noted they had been invited to attend a parent / carer interview as an “observer” (PST 4 & 8). However, none of the participants had experienced how to write a report or discussed with their mentor teachers how to collect appropriate data or what to include when reporting to parents/carers. This lack of experience meant all of the interviewees noted it affected their confidence to undertake such activities. Preservice teachers commented that the mentors did not invite them to parent/carers – teacher interviews because of “confidentiality” (PST 1) or the “parents may feel uncomfortable with an observer in the room” (PST 7) or “sometimes the interviews can get tricky so it is best not to be involved” (PST 3).

At university, it is difficult to have the experience of conducting interviews with parents and carers. The in-school experience is an opportunity for preservice teachers to gain first-hand knowledge before they undertake tasks solo in their first-year of teaching. Being able to share reporting methods and knowing what data to collect and report would be advantageous to preservice teachers, particularly in their final year of their teacher education program. Just as it is common practice in medicine for interns to “observe” patient consults, such experiences would be useful for preservice teachers.

More than 10% of the participants indicated a lack of confidence in the area of assessment, feedback and reporting on student learning. Although university coursework presents strategies around assessment, feedback and reporting, the main issue tends to be having opportunities for engaging in real-world contexts within the associated focus areas. By the end of their final year, many preservice teachers have not had opportunities to make judgements using moderation techniques around student learning. The preservice teachers who had been involved in making judgements about students’ work during their professional experiences commented that “they found the moderation process with their mentor teachers highly valuable to their understanding of assessment” (PST 2). They also noted how this process gave them “further insight about what they would report to parents” (PST 1). Indeed, reporting to parents/carers about student learning and assessment and moderation practices would be considered the classroom teachers’ responsibility and, consequently, preservice teachers should have first-hand experience in this focus area. Awareness of these self-reported gaps in learning can assist universities and schools to work together to devise new ways for preservice teachers to gain vital first-hand experiences.

A clear majority of final-year preservice teachers reported confidence for each of the focus areas in Standard 6 (Table 7). Indeed, 97% claimed they could apply constructive feedback from supervisors and teachers to improve teaching (6.3).

APST focus area at Graduate career stage	%*	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
6.1 Apply the standards for teaching	91	4.09	0.55
6.2 Engage in professional development for improvement	91	4.17	0.64
6.3 Apply constructive feedback from supervisors and teachers to improve teaching	97	4.36	0.54
6.4 Apply professional learning to improve student outcomes	93	4.16	0.54

*%=Percentage of students who either “agreed” or “strongly agreed” about their confidence with the APST focus area.

Table 7. Standard 6 - Preservice Teachers’ Perceptions of Engaging in Professional Learning

Interview data confirmed reasons why the preservice teachers were confident for engaging in all focus areas of Standard 6. The interviewees noted they had many opportunities to apply the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (2011) as part of their learning at university and also in the school experiences. They noted “that the professional experience reports incorporated the standards so it was important to keep referring to these as a guide for learning and teaching” (PST 7). They also noted they could see the benefits of professional learning as they were “invited to attend and I gained a lot of information.” (PST 6). Additionally, “listening to and enacting feedback from my mentor teacher was how I developed my teaching skills and practices” (PST 8). PST 1 noted that when professional learning was applied in a number of instances “positive impacts on student learning was the outcome and the benefits were encouraging”. It seems the consistently high levels of self-reported confidence for the focus areas of Standard 6 related to the positive experiences of the final-year preservice teachers.

Finally, there were two focus areas in Standard 7 (Table 8) where 93% of final-year preservice teachers indicated confidence (i.e., 7.1 & 7.2). However, percentages associated with engaging with parents and carers and networking with professional teaching networks considerably less than 90%.

APST focus area at Graduate career stage	%*	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
7.1 Meet professional ethics	93	4.24	0.58
7.2 Comply with the policies for teachers	93	4.22	0.58
7.3 Effectively engage with parents and carers in a supportive manner	82	4.01	0.75
7.4 Network with professional teaching networks and the broader community	79	3.89	0.68

*%=Percentage of students who either “agreed” or “strongly agreed” about their confidence with the APST focus area.

Table 8. Standard 7 - Preservice Teachers’ Perceptions of Engaging Professionally with Colleagues, Parents/Carers and the Community

Interview data suggested that a lack of opportunities accounted for some preservice teachers’ inability to agree they were confident to engage with parents and carers. The preservice teachers noted “I just wasn’t provided with a chance to interact with parents” (PST 5) and “I don’t think my mentor teacher was really keen for me to have in-depth conversations with the parents” (PST 1) and finally, “it wasn’t encouraged during my professional experience” (PST 10). Indeed, this was a theme that emerged from previous responses to other standards. Data from Tables 4 and 6 also indicated a lack of confidence for engaging with parents and descriptive statistics in Table 8 confirms this concern. It would seem to gain more confidence requires first-hand involvement in the concerns presented by the final-year preservice teachers. Bandura (1977) presents vicarious experiences as a way to develop confidence through observing others modelling practice but mastery experiences necessitates practical applications.

Limitations and Further Research

Although self-reported confidence does not necessarily provide an overall picture of ability, there is evidence to suggest that confident teachers are more likely to achieve positive outcomes for their students (Cripps Clark, & Walsh, 2002; Walsh & Cripps Clark, 2005). Even though the surveys were anonymous, bias through self-reporting may indicate different results (e.g., Marsh & Roche, 1997), however there are cases in other fields where self-reporting may be considered comparable to observational reports from others (e.g., Goodman, Meltzer, & Bailey, 1998). It is suggested that self-reported confidence can provide an indication of preparedness for teaching (Giallo & Little, 2003; Pajares, 1992). This current study draws upon self-reported confidence data, hence, further research can include observations of final-year preservice teacher practices in classrooms to identify the alignment to the APST at graduate career stage. Other studies can include investigating how preservice teachers at different stages in their coursework (e.g., first year, second year, third year) align with the APST at graduate career stage, which may help to differentiate coursework at the tertiary level. A longitudinal study following first-year preservice teachers' confidence across the four years may also indicate whether or not particular preservice teachers remain not confident for teaching throughout the degree, which, can provide valuable information for enrolment in coursework and addressing issues across the four years. In addition, national documents will change (e.g., Donnelly & Wiltshire, 2014; TEMAG, 2014), which is evident from the related reviews into teacher education and discussions about the APST. Thus, there is a need to research changes in documentation to determine the effects on preservice teacher self-reported confidence for teaching with the APST.

Conclusion

This study investigated final-year preservice teachers' self-reported confidence for teaching aligned with the Australian Professional Standards for Teaching (APST) at the graduate career stage. Survey responses from 312 preservice teachers indicated that 95% or more agreed they were confident for: Understanding how students learn; using curriculum knowledge to design lessons; demonstrating a range of communication skills in the classroom; organising the classroom with clear expectations; and applying feedback from supervisors for self-improvement. The explanatory research design uncovered reasons for perceived gaps in confidence against the APST. Preservice teachers were confident about teaching at the graduate career stage, when they received thorough university coursework and had opportunities to practice these skills in the classroom. However, the final-year preservice teachers potentially identified gaps in their teacher preparation with 30% or more of preservice teachers surveyed indicating they lacked preparation to: Use strategies to support full participation of students with a disability; demonstrate understanding for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; engage with parents and carers to support student learning; and report on student learning to parents and carers. Interviews reasoned that these gaps were largely a result of not having first-hand experiences during their professional school experiences, mainly because the schools may not have contexts that support these experiences.

There are many methods presented across Australian education systems for gathering evidence of successful accreditation (e.g., Marshall et al., 2012), and, at a preservice teacher level, allowing preservice teachers to self-report their learning can add to this evidence. Although there is debate and criticism about the formation and implementation of the APST, they are recognised across Australia so provide consistency of practice. AITSL, education

departments, universities and schools can further support the preservice teacher process in reaching the Graduate career stage by providing accessible toolkits that build confidence. For instance, preservice teachers lacking confidence in evaluative strategies to support student learning can be provided with a range of resources and how they can be used (e.g., evaluative instruments with application). Such resources need to be apparent on accessible websites and need to be based on research showing consistency across platforms and institutions. Yet, caution must be exercised that these do not become prescriptive but rather examples and exemplars for effective teaching practices. All people have differentiated learning needs and preservice teachers also require differentiation towards becoming a teaching professional. Surveys linked to the APST for graduate career stage can act as an evaluative tool for determining potential strengths and gaps in a teacher education degree. Identifying the potential gaps from the perspective of final-year preservice teachers may aid universities to consider ways for closing the gaps and strengthening areas where final-year preservice teachers may require further support.

Many of the final-year preservice teachers in this study were only weeks away from full-time employment as beginning teachers, where they have full responsibility for the students in their classrooms. It needs to be highlighted that perceived gaps in their confidence to teach within various APST focus areas may develop with time as the preservice teachers make the transition to the profession and gain further experience. The work of teachers is complex and at this novice stage of their career, preservice teachers may not always understand the full implications of what it is they need to know (Sutherland, Howard, & Markauskaite, 2010). Furthermore, it may be the case that there will always be around 10% or so not confident for teaching, and whether these particular preservice teachers achieve confidence once they are working within the profession would require further study.

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